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European Working Group on Environmental Tobacco Smoke and Lung Cancer

Chairman: Professor Jeffrey Idle, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim

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SCIENTISTS REJECT ASSOCIATION BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTAL TOBACCO SMOKE AND LUNG CANCER

The current scientific evidence does not support the conclusion that environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) is a lung carcinogen in humans, according to a new risk assessment published by an independent panel of six senior European scientists.

The European Working Group on Environmental Tobacco Smoke and Lung Cancer conducted a full evaluation of the relevant epidemiological and biological literature in what is believed to be the most extensive study of its kind.

"This group brought together recognised experts from the fields of genetics, biochemistry, nutrition, statistics, clinical and molecular sciences to conduct an exhaustive risk assessment on ETS and lung cancer," said Professor Jeffrey Idle, professor in medicine at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, and chairman of the European Working Group. "Having considered the weight of evidence, it is the judgement of the Working Group that environmental tobacco smoke is not a primary lung carcinogen," Professor Idle said.

Evaluation of Epidemiological Studies on ETS

The European Working Group analysed all 48 epidemiological studies on ETS and lung cancer published world-wide. Evaluating the so-called spousal studies (mostly among non-smoking women living with men who smoke), the Group concluded a relative risk of lung cancer for the non-smokers of 1.01 -- based on the U.S. studies, the largest homogeneous group. The Group's evaluation of studies on workplace smoking put the relative risk from ETS in the workplace at 1.04. Neither of these risk estimates was statistically significant.

"A relative risk of 1.0 means a zero increase in risk, and relative risks of 1.01 and 1.04 are virtually meaningless in scientific terms. They are no different from a zero increase in risk," Professor Idle said. Most scientists believe that relative risks below 2.0 are generally inconclusive.

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Evaluation of Exposure to ETS

The European Working Group also found that in everyday settings, where levels of ETS have actually been measured, only a few of the compounds present in tobacco smoke have been detected because of their extremely low concentrations.

"We were very surprised at the extremely low levels of exposure to chemicals from ETS. With the aid of a straightforward calculation, we found that the concentration of ETS constituents is consistently lower than the levels of the same individual chemicals permitted in the workplace -- ten to one million times lower," Professor Idle said.

The report also stressed the role of lifestyle. "Exposure to ETS is most unlikely to be a significant risk factor for lung cancer in humans because, compared to such a low level of exposure to chemicals, other common lifestyle risk factors are likely to play a more significant role."

Evaluation of Biological Plausibility

The panel of scientists also evaluated the claim that ETS is a lung carcinogen because it is similar to the cigarette smoke inhaled by smoking. But, according to the report, "Often an unfounded assumption regarding the similarity between ETS and either mainstream or sidestream smoke is used to justify an argument of biological plausibility. The report suggests that such an assumption is inappropriate."

The European Working Group's report concluded: "Our findings are entirely consistent with there being no elevated risk of lung cancer by exposure to ETS at work or in the home, either from a smoking parent or a spouse."

The study was commissioned by three tobacco companies -- Philip Morris Europe S.A., British-American Tobacco Company Limited and Rothmans International Services Limited -- to evaluate published claims on the relationship between ETS and the risk of lung cancer.

The European scientists agreed to conduct the study on the condition that their work remained free of interference from the funding organisations. The Working Group reserved the right to publish their findings regardless of the outcome.

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Editor's note: The European Working Group was chaired by Professor Jeffrey Idle. Other members are Professor Hans Krokan, The Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim; Professor Julio Benitez, University of Extremadura, Badajoz, Spain; Professor Paul Lohman, Leiden University, The Netherlands; Professor Marcel Roberfroid, Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium; Dr. Anthony Springall, independent statistician, Clevedon, UK.

The full report is available from Michael Johnson, 24-28 Bloomsbury Way, London WC1A 2PX, telephone: 0044171 831 6262.

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